

I LOVE YOU; NOT ENOUGH

By

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ABSTRACT

I Love You; Not Enough is an exploration of family dynamic, relationship dysfunction, secret pasts, and the manner in which individuals handle a drastic shift in their current realities. The story of this family begins in the summer after Janie's first year at college, when she comes home only to find that their dynamic has been uprooted by her father's affair. Following are five short stories, a mixture of experimental and traditional fiction, that explore the summer following Janie's return. Though it begins with a simple view of the family as a whole, as time progresses it is revealed that there is much more to this family than meets the eye. As the collection progresses, it seeks to examine the differences in relationships, the underlying factors in how those act in them, boundaries crossed and limits reached, and what brings a relationship to its end.

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Disneyland

“Hell yeah, Disneyland!”

“Don’t say hell, Tommy,” said the mother as she primped his hair before sending him off into the back seat. The assembly line of two other children behind him waited for their inspection before they were to get in the car, and they giggled with hands covering their mouths at his slip-up.

“Make sure your overalls are strapped properly, Lily-Anne.”

“They are, Mama.”

“Let me check.” The mother rose from inside the car, leaning toward the chubby-cheeked child with wild, curly pigtails. “They’re all twisted up, doll. You don’t want to be walking around like that, do you?”

“Mama, stop,” the child moaned as she tucked in her polka-dotted shirt and pulled her ankle socks upwards. “We’re only getting in the car.”

“And it’s going to get messed up in there, too. Hop in.” The next boy came to stand in front of her, and she lifted him lightly into his booster, then looked around behind her before leaning back in to the car. “Tommy, where’s your sister?”

“Her room. She’s not ready yet, she said.”

“Let’s go!” came a booming voice from the driver’s seat.

“We’re trying!” the mother replied lightly. “Janie’s taking her time.”

“Then we’ll leave without her,” said the father.

“No, we will not, Tom,” she snapped back at him, knowing that he was not being sarcastic in the slightest. Ever since Janie had come back, they had been nagging at one another,

and she had been trying to ignore it. She didn't like when any of them were openly aggressive with one another, liked to have everything calm. Especially today, which she had planned for so carefully, so meticulously. She was not about to let their little arguments take away from that.

"Janie is half the reason we're doing this, now that she's finally home from school for a little."

Right on cue came Janie, as if she could sense the husband's patience with her dropping with every second, waltzing out of the open garage door with her head in her phone and her long hair trailing behind her.

"Let's go!" shouted the husband, honking the horn and startling her into looking up at the family.

"I wasn't even that much later than everyone else." She rolled her eyes as she scooted into the cracked seat of the mini-van next to where the second youngest boy sat in his booster seat, happily kicking his legs against the chair's cushion. He waved his plastic action figure in her face and she shoved his hand aside with a groan. "How long is this drive supposed to be?"

"Don't ask how long the drive is going to be," said the mother from the front with a chipper smile. "You'll know when we get there! Besides, it'll be fun to spend some time all together. That's the purpose of this whole outing, Janie, car ride and all. To spend time together."

She could feel her husband's presence next to her, but at the same time it felt like he wasn't there at all. He was already zoned out, somewhere far away from the car, his mind running through the rubber wires that connected to his ears. All fell silent as the car backed out of the driveway and began the drive through the twisting streets of the neighborhood that led towards the freeway. As they pulled out of their neighborhood through the windows, the family

could see the outline of the ocean, looking barely blue with the white sunlight reflecting off its waves.

“We should go to the beach, Mama.”

“We’re going to Disneyland, Lily-Anne. Remember?”

“I wanna go to the ocean!”

“Let’s go to the beach!” The littlest boy chimed in.

“No beach, Nick. We planned a day at Disneyland, and it’s going to be fun for everyone. Just as fun as the beach.”

“Why can’t we go tomorrow?”

“Because, this is the plan that I made. We’re getting to Disneyland today, going on rides, then we’re going to watch the fireworks tonight, and tomorrow I got us passes so we can go on the rides even more before we go home.”

The little boy crinkled his face. “I don’t like scary rides.”

“Then you don’t need to go on the scary rides, Nick.”

“Scary rides?” The little girl said with fear in her voice. “Mama, no!”

“Yeah, Lily-Anne, you’re gonna get so scared on some of them,” said the older boy from the front. “They’re big, and fast, and dark. Sometimes there’s monsters.”

“Monsters!” Said the little boy. “Mama, no Disneyland!”

“Kids!” The mother shrieked loudly, turning around with a snap. The car fell silent, the two little faces in the back peering up fearfully. She softened her expression slightly, but kept her eyes firm. “Tommy, stop trying to scare them. Lily-Anne and Nick, stop the nonsense. There’s something for everyone there, okay?”

She was greeted by silence from the back.

“I spent a lot of time planning this for all of us, and we’re all going to have fun. It’s not very nice to complain and ask to go somewhere else when someone does something nice for you like plan a trip somewhere special.”

“So no beach?”

Amy groaned, turning back around and rubbing her eyes. She didn't answer the little boy, who was peering up at her with curious eyes.

“Going to the beach would’ve saved me a pretty penny,” the father now chimed in, muttering under his breath.

She looked over at her husband, shaking her head, and pled quietly, “Tom, please. Back me up on this one. Be a *partner*.”

She got no response from him further than blowing a gust of frustrated air through his nose. With one headphone blasting NPR in his ear and eyes glued on the road ahead, he ignored her request. That was her pet peeve, when he tuned her out like that, but it wasn’t like he hadn’t been doing it for as long as they had been married. She had hoped that this family outing that she had so carefully planned, the first one that she had really tried to pull together, would maybe have brought him back a little. She had hoped that maybe he would see her trying and actually try back. But this had been just that — hope, as it had never truly been like that with her. Not since they had been married, at least. She was met with nothing but a cold wall, but lately it was not the same stoney exterior that she had been met with for so long. Something had changed.

“We aren’t going to the beach because it’s cold, Nick,” interjected Janie. “Besides, no way you would catch me in a swim suit right now, not after this semester.”

“Oh Janie, please tell me you’ve been watching your eating,” the mother said.

“I have been mom, but it’s hard. The food isn’t as good as when you’re at home, and you eat out a lot.”

“Then don’t eat out as much. Or get a salad.”

Janie groaned, unlocking her phone and burying her face into it. “Can we not talk about this? I don’t want to fight when I’m home.”

“Aw, shut up Janie. You’re around even less than Dad is, even when you come home.” her brother leered, leaning over from where he sat next to her and poking her forearm with his finger. She swatted him away again.

The father pressed down on the accelerator firmly, silently.

“Nicholas, don’t speak about your father that way,” said Amy from the front seat.

“What way?”

“When your father isn’t home it’s because he’s at work, working hard so that we can afford to do nice things like this.”

The older boy piped up now, his squeaky voice rising up and over to the front seat.

“That’s not what Jax was saying to me.”

“Who the hell is Jax?” whispered the father.

“Kid in his class. Black curly hair, he’s been over for birthday parties.” Amy said back, and he flinched lightly, as if he hadn’t expected her to hear him.

“Never heard that name in my life.”

“What’d Jax say?” Janie asked, her face rising from the screen. It turned black with a flick of her finger and she turned around to face her brother. The only sound around them now was the whir of the air conditioning and hum of the car’s motor.

“Who the hell is Jax?” the girl yelped.

“Don’t say that word, Lily-Anne” came the mother’s weary voice again.

Janie pressed on. “Tommy, what did Jax say?” She devilishly smiled back at the boy, then flicked her eyes to her father’s face in the rearview mirror. He didn’t return her glance, but kept his eyes glued on the road ahead as if he hadn’t heard anything. Her smile faltered slightly, her eyes narrowing.

“Nuthin’, I don’t know.” His fair skin turned beet red, visible up through his buzzed white blonde hair. The mother turned to face him, knowing how little he liked this kind of attention.

“Janie, stop,” came the voice of the husband now, slightly wavering. Janie looked up at him again, his eyes not meeting hers this time. She folded her eyebrows together, and her smile faltered. The mother looked at him, her face clouding with confusion at him now stepping in. She hadn’t expected him to speak again, and especially not when she actually needed it.

“Don’t antagonize him,” said the mother, adding on to his statement.

“I’m not,” she snapped, looking back at her brother. “I’m just curious, now he’s acting all weird about it.”

“I’m not being weird.”

“You’re bothering him over nothing. You’re acting like a child,” the husband interjected again, and Janie rolled her eyes, then glared at her father. Her mother shifted uncomfortably in her seat, wondering where this tension and anger between them had come from.

“I don’t want you upsetting him.”

“He’s fine. Why can’t we just talk?”

The mother turned around, silently giving up on the situation. She ran her hand over her eyebrows and nursed an oncoming headache. It was clear that nobody was listening to her today. But as she did this, something inside her made her not tune out the bickering, as she normally would have in an attempt to save her own mood. Usually she would take this time and look out the window at the passing scenery, muting the car around her, imagining that her little group was quiet, orderly, excited for something that she had planned for them. Today, she listened.

The boy looked back and forth from his eager siblings to his zoned out parents in the front seat, his body tense. He then focused his stare to the ground below his dangling legs, trailing the tips of his sneakers against the soft car floor.

“I dunno, Dad came in to school that one day, to give a presentation about his work. And when he left, I was really happy about seeing him there, and I said something about how dad has been working a lot more lately, ya know. And well, Jax said that he saw my dad in his house at night a coupla times.”

The father’s eyes stayed fixated on the freeway ahead of him, his foot pressing down on even accelerator just a little more now. The car picked up pace, his body tensed, now holding the wheel with both hands. Janie’s face dropped. Her mother’s turned pale.

“Tommy, that was —” The father began, but Janie interrupted before he could say any more. His eyes flicked away from the road, now staring his oldest son down with a deep fire in his stare. The little boy didn’t notice, but Janie did, peering up at his glare without meeting his eyes.

“What do you mean, at night?”

The mother could hear suspicion creeping into her oldest daughter’s voice, a stinging validation of her own thoughts.

“Just there, hanging out with his mom or something. Said they were in the kitchen for a while when Jax was s’posed to be in bed, but he snuck out because he wanted to know what his mom was doing talking to someone out there. And he told me, he doesn’t think my dad’s just at work when he isn’t at home at night. But I told him my dad’s probably just doing work with his mom, right?”

His question was met with the muted, delayed response from his mother, “Yes, just doing work with her. That’s right.”

“Yes, Tommy,” said the father. There was a strain in his voice as he spoke, shakiness fighting the rigidity that had been in it all day. “What he said didn’t mean anything.”

The car was a different kind of silent now. There was something filling the air between the parents in the front seat, and Janie in the middle, who was staring at the back of her father’s seat with a burning fire in her eyes. Between the three in the middle and the back seat, who seemed relieved but not quite satisfied with the answer they were given. They could all feel it growing now, building with every movement: the turning of the tires of the car, the shift of the vehicle as the father switched lanes. The mother stared straight ahead, not daring to take a

sideways peek at her husband. She knew if she did, in that moment she would snap, and she had not planned this day for it to be ruined in a car ride, even if what she had originally planned it for was.

At least now she knew what had been so different.

“When are we going to be there?” Nick asked quietly.

“Soon, Nick.”

The mother looked ahead through hardened eyes, her face drawn tight in an attempt to keep her emotions under control. She saw the father's eyes flash in the rear view mirror, where Janie's were burning straight through it. When he caught her eye, he looked away quickly, and she could sense him tensing up even further.

“Janie?” The little girl called forward. Janie, kept her eyes stuck to her phone screen. Her attention to the phone didn't falter for a second, not even when her name was called again and the little one began kicking her seat.

“Listen, the kid doesn't know what he is saying,” the father muttered, leaning over just slightly, his voice low enough so none of the children could hear.

“I don't want to talk about it right now, Tom,” she replied, finally looking his way. “I planned a nice day for our family to be together and I want today to stay nice. We're supposed to be bonding, so that's what we will do. You and I can talk about it tomorrow, but I did not try this hard for my efforts to be thrown out the window during our drive over.”

“Janie, why aren't you answering me?” The girl pressed on from the back.

The mother turned around again from her husband's absent stare, to analyze the newest action in the back of the car. Her thin, faked smile quickly turned to a frown as she realized that her oldest was tuning them all out once again, fingers rapidly punching at her phone's screen.

"Get off the phone, Janie," she said, tapping her leg to get her attention. Janie's head finally tore itself from the screen and her wet, glassy eyes met her mother's steel blue. She knew that her oldest was the only one who understood the weight of the information that had just been revealed, who seemed to share the same heaviness in her heart that she felt now.

"Yeah, get off the phone Janie," the older boy jeered from behind.

"Shut up Tommy," Janie replied, looking down again.

"Yeah, shut up Tommy," came the littlest one's voice from next to him. The girl blew a raspberry from the backseat, inciting a giggle from the boy in front of them.

"Don't tell your brother to shut up, Lily-Anne," said the mother.

"Don't tell me to shut up, Lily-Anne."

The mother sighed and rested her head against the headrest. Her fingers traced over her forehead lightly, wanting to press down as if to clear this from her mind, but unwilling to touch with enough force to remove her makeup.

"Janie, why don't you tell us about school," she said through her fingers.

"It's fine."

"How are your grades?" Interjected the father.

"They've been okay."

"Could you do anything to make them great?"

“Probably,” she paused, a twisted smirk crossing her face and drying her eyes. “Maybe I could start cheating.”

Each body in the car roughly jerked backwards, their skulls slapping the headrests of their seats, as the driver’s foot slammed on the accelerator.

“Ow, Dad,” the younger boy whined. He rubbed the back of his head where it had been snapped backwards from looking down at the toy in his lap.

“Thomas!” The mother looked over at her husband with flames in her eyes. He looked back, fear filling his own. He removed the headphone from his ear and silenced his radio, flicking his eyes back to the road.

“Sorry, sorry, Janie just...” He muttered, trailing off. “Janie, why would you say that?”

She shrugged. “School’s hard. Some of the people that I’m close to cheat, and they get away with it. If they can do it, then it must be okay, mustn’t it?”

He was silent, grimacing lightly. Janie glared at the back of his seat. Nobody responded immediately, all digesting what she had just said on their own time.

“My teachers always say it isn’t okay to cheat on tests and stuff.” Tommy chimed in lightly, his eyebrows stitching themselves together. “Why is Janie cheating?”

“I’m not cheating. I’m just saying it’s tempting to do, and it seems like it could be the easiest way out when you’re stuck in a hard situation.”

The older boy looked over the seats to where his father sat, as if impatient for a response from him. The father kept his empty gaze forward facing, never taking his eyes off the road.

“Well now,” his wife interjected. “Cheating seems like it could just be an easy solution to your problems, sure, but in the long run what happens if you get caught? Then you’re in nothing but a bigger batch of problems than when things seemed hard before.”

“Dad, what do you have to say about it?” Janie pressed on, unwavering in her determination to get him to speak up. He grimaced at the question, and his wife kept her gaze on him firm, wondering where her oldest had gotten this fire in her from. Or why she kept pressing so hard. But she wanted to hear the answer, so she stayed silent.

He cleared his throat, coughing a couple times. More silence. Then a deep breath before he finally responded to his awaiting family.

“I—well, cheating—it’s is never the answer, Janie. No matter how much you think it may be in the moment. And if you were to get caught doing something so wrong, well,” he turned towards his wife, his face relaxing, sagging, the wrinkles in his skin falling back into place as the strain within him was released. The car began to slow down, his foot easing off the gas. “You’d find out it’s a mistake that could ruin not just your reputation, but your whole life. Forever.”

Janie popped her earphones in her ears, ignoring his statement, drowning out the pervasive silence. His speech had finally made everyone keep to themselves, and the car that pulled into the parking garage of the amusement park looked to have a well-kept, orderly family piling out of it once they parked. But as they did, the hostility crept out after them as leaving the car to taint the air around them, their twisted dynamics playing games with each other in the spaces above their heads.

As the mother lifted the kids out of the car one by one, her husband came to stand by her side. Her body flinched away from him now, feeling as if there were electric bolts coming off of

him. Without giving him a second glance, and before he could say any more to try to save himself, she took the hands of the littlest two and began to steer them away from the car. “Come on, everyone, follow me! Tom, you can grab the stroller and meet us up there.”

The other two children trailed behind her, Janie dragging the older boy along, leaving their father still standing at the side of the car, frozen, watching his family march towards the park ahead.

When the five arrived at the entrance, the mother stopped them all. “Let’s take a picture, before we go in.”

Feeling fatigued, and as though there were bricks resting heavy on her limbs, she reached down to her purse for her camera, then aligned the children together in their usual photo positions. She moved back a few steps, taking note of each breath through her nose and ignoring the growing pit in her stomach. She knew that to get through the day and give her children the fun that she promised she would have to put on the best show possible. This would be her grand performance, and once the curtains fell and tomorrow came she would deal with the darkness on stage. As she locked eyes with Janie, she forced the most genuine grin that she could on her face to tell her that all was well. The girl looked away, unfooled and straight-faced, and grabbed her sister’s hand. The mother sighed, raising the camera up to meet her eye-line.

“Say, Disneyland!” She yelled to the kids in the peppiest voice she had.

“Hell yeah, Disneyland!” Said the oldest boy once again, pumping his fist in the air as the shutter clicked.

An Adulterer's Wife's Agenda

Wake up. Try to really wake up, even though the fog creeping up behind your eyes tries not to let you. Look at the empty space next to you, the covers rumpled around where a body should be. Try to remember the last time you woke up with someone next to you. Think to yourself: *Did he leave this morning, did he ever come home? Is he with her again, or maybe someone new?* Stop torturing yourself. Get up, wash your face in the marble bathroom that once looked like home to you and now just feels cold and uninviting. Try to get the puffiness out of your eyes with the cold water, but know when you look in the mirror they will look the same as they have every morning since that day that you found out. Go get the little one from her room, carry her to the kitchen. Pour three bowls of cereal, because the oldest one is somewhere, she left already, but you only know this because her room was empty when you passed by, as it has been every morning since you got back. Think to yourself, when will your oldest daughter get back, *Why is she avoiding me?* Maybe her and your husband are together on the days that you don't see them, it wouldn't be surprising. Imagine what they could be saying about you, wonder what you will say to her if you can gather the courage to ask why she cannot stand to be around you, why she is punishing you for something you didn't do. Continue on with these conversations swirling around your mind, mixing in with the fog and exhaustion. Get the kids dressed, one by one, ignoring the fact that you too have to get dressed soon. Listen to their mindless babble as you go through the motions. Think of how before you would sit with them and answered their questions, engaging in their conversation, every thought a little treasure to be discovered; how getting them ready each morning was your favorite part of it, the little time spent putting them all together and peeking into their heads. Try to listen now. Remember that it doesn't matter, because

your efforts with weren't enough to keep them from hating you. Avoid the eyes of the little ones, because looking in them reminds you too much of his piercing stare—though theirs are warm, thoughtful, not like his have been. Send them into the living room, click on the show that you used to never allow them to watch but now you need just for a moment of silence. Leave them glued to the screen, drag your feet down the endless hallway back to your room. Consider changing out of pajamas, but then realize what is the use, if being presentable wasn't enough before? Question yourself. What more could you have done? What was it that you did that finally pushed him to his breaking point? Where did you go wrong? Shake these thoughts out of your head, as you have so often lately. Try to distract yourself, continue getting ready for the day. Brush your teeth, ignore your stomach growling, food doesn't sound appetizing anyways. Make the bed for two, then the four beds for one, but they're all for one right now, aren't they? Notice that the guest room bed is unmade, but don't think too much about it and make it anyways. Try to make it all look nice on the outside, just like you always have, so maybe they don't notice what's happening on the inside; it isn't like you've had anyone over to notice it, but maybe one day, or maybe you're doing it so you can pretend that what's happening on the inside isn't, so you can escape the insanity that has become your reality. Check on the kids, still perfectly content on the couch in front of that screen. Check your phone, looking for a text from him or your daughter, neither of whom have texted, even though you have been waiting for her to say something, anything. You didn't expect it from him, but remember that she seemed just as upset as you that day. Consider that, when it came to those two: you never stood a chance, and if they teamed up on you, you just might collapse. Go answer the doorbell, greet the babysitter, the girl you need to keep the kids away from when things were too hard, from days like today that they

just couldn't get in the way of. Say hello, hand her the car keys. Tell her that the boys need to be dropped at practice, to take the girl to the park while they are there. Make sure to add that her shirt is new, so don't let her get dirty. Then say to keep them out all day, that you have a lot to do around the house, to take the kids to a movie and have them back after dinner. Tell her that you will have her paid by the end of the week, that you don't know if you will need her back, but you hope that you don't. When her face falls, tell her that you didn't want to have a nanny, that you had always promised yourself you never would need one, because you were always capable enough to handle the children. Watch as she nods her head slowly, note the worry in her eyes. Send her into the living room without another word, walk towards your room, listen for the sound of the garage door closing. Head back to the bathroom and begin to coat your face, first with liquid, then powder. Brush black wetness onto your eyelashes, brown across your eyebrows. Get lost in this, the routine so natural you don't need to think. That's what each day has become, a pattern of routines that you can get lost in. Take out your hair from its tight bun that rests on the base of your skull and shake out the loose curls that have now formed. Brush through the blond hairs, ignoring the darkness at the root that is slowly creeping back. Remind yourself to make that appointment to get it re-done, the appointment you know you won't make because you don't want to go out right now for fear of seeing her, for fear of having to put on a smile and make forced small talk all the while holding back the urge to lose all control and break the exterior that you've worked so hard to create. Imagine it for a moment, running into her. In the grocery store, maybe, walking down the same aisle. Imagine seeing her there, walking over to her and tapping her on the shoulder, watching as she turned around, her face dropping in fear as she saw yours. Imagine telling her that you know, even though she knew that from the moment she saw you.

You would tell her there what she had done, how twisted it was, raise your voice, turning it into a true argument. People would stop and stare, but you wouldn't notice them, wouldn't care who saw. Run your fingers through your hair, snap out of it. Look at yourself in the mirror, try to recognize the woman who looks back. Wish that, just for a moment, she was the woman in your imagination. Then hide the darkness in your hair with a thick headband that pushes the loose tendrils wafting around your face back, hiding the fantasies along with it. As long as you can hide it, it isn't a problem. Head to the laundry room, grab the cleaning supplies. Go back to the bathroom. Wipe down every counter, eliminate every dust mite, scrub the floors. Then bleach the shower, wash the sheets, fold the laundry, ignore the fact that there are less of his clothes in there than usual, ignore the thought that you're eliminating his presence in the house more and more with each movement, ignore the photos of him that seem to follow your every step around the house. Let the scent of the cleaning products drift into your nose, but instead of turning away inhale as if they can clean the mess inside of you as well. Allow yourself to get lost in it, the security of knowing the outcome, the feeling of being in control, the love of having a spotless home. Don't think, let your body take you through the motions you knew all too well, that you loved doing, making everything feel perfect on the outside. Feel the rawness in your fingertips from the past few weeks of doing this daily, the one thing that has allowed you escape and a sense of peace. Feel a little bit of lightness come into your body as you scrub harder, find any little bit of dust or dirt that you can so there's more to do. Then get up, look around your space, a shared space that will soon be for one. Put away the chemicals, the cleaners, get up and brush off your knees.

Then begin to do what you know you have had to do for two weeks now, but you haven't wanted to do, but you told yourself that you could not go on feeling trapped inside your own home. Grab the suitcases from the closet and stack what little clothing he has in your room inside of them. Fold the shirts carefully, making everything fit precisely into each spot. It's become a game now, cleaning, fitting each article of clothing into its perfect spot to distract yourself from the reality of what was happening; like a puzzle, everything working its way together so nicely and making you think: is this how your marriage was destined to end? Try not to think about how easy it is to pack his life away. Stuff his brush, his toothbrush, his shaving products, whatever looks like his into a black leather bag. Set it all nicely by the door, and it looks like he is just leaving for a work trip like he had so many times this year—or so he had said, the truth you didn't know. Go to the empty kitchen in your now empty house and sit at the counter, chew absently at a bowl of leftover pasta but not really taste it.

Hear the door open; she's home now, the oldest, and she sees the suitcases. See her walk into the kitchen quietly, feel the tension radiating off her body. Hear her say, *Mom, what the hell is this, why are there suitcases by the door, where are you going?* Shake your head, tell her, *It isn't me, it's your father*, and she says *Where is he going, why hasn't he said anything*, and say that he doesn't know but he's about to find out. Wince as she says, *So this is it, you're just giving up on all of this, on all of us, and you aren't even going to tell anyone. Say Janie what more can I do.* Think to yourself: she doesn't understand that you have been trying, that all you want to do is protect the family you worked so hard to make perfect and that you can't do that with him around. She says *so you're just going to make him leave, you don't even care about how we feel. How I feel.* Say what you can, say *I'm so sorry*, as she stands there quietly, tears starting to roll

down her face. Wonder once more: where did you go wrong, when did you allow this anger and mania that to creep itself into your tight knit home? Say *this may not be as bad as you think, we just need a break right now, we don't know that it's over for good*, but know that it is, that this can't be forgiven, and she knows it too. She is squinting now, just as he does when he is thinking, her eyebrows folding over long lashes, just as he does when he is mad. You are taking him from her. Think of what you can say to her to try and fix it. Crumple a little in your chair, knowing it will always be your fault to her. Watch as anger sinks into her eyes and dries her tears. Look even closer, and see someone wholly different than your daughter, a woman who has crept into her body without you even realizing that it had happened, maybe in the past few weeks, maybe in the past few years, who understands what is happening and doesn't speak to you like her mother. Something changed in her so long ago and she stopped thinking of you like that, of either of you like that. Listen as she says *you're pushing him away, you have been for so long*. Let the words settle in, then say to her *I'm just trying to do what's best for you and the little ones, who the best person is to have around, who will have the best intentions for us*. Note that she curves her lip in the same way that he did when you would say something that he knew was right.

Look at her now, and remember all the things that got you here, all the things about him that seem to have faded away now. Remember when you first met him in college, how he had spice in his cologne and cinnamon in his breath from the whiskey he drank, both of which would linger on your lips and skin for long after you had last seen him. How he would reach down and kiss you, and he was just a bit too tall, so you would have to get up on your tip toes to meet him. Remember how you had noticed he had a small tattoo on the inside of his pinky finger for his grandmother, and how you would twirl yours around his, making him promise you forever as

you did. Remember how he would come to your apartment, letting himself in with confidence and ease, twirling his car keys on his fingers and telling you that you were going somewhere, and your stomach would fill with a tingly, soaring sensation at the excitement of the unknown. How you didn't need to plan, until your shaky fingers held the pregnancy test, and he had known you had a secret and would try and pry it out of you with his lips, but you wouldn't tell him because you knew what you wanted. How when he had proposed to you he had wrapped his pinky around yours after putting the ring on, but his smile when he said it his eyes didn't squint as much as before. Remember when Janie had been born, how he would come home from work so late and crawl into the other side of the bed without even touching you, when he used to fall asleep with his hand on your hips each night. How alone you had been, trapped inside the walls of your own home. How when she had gotten older, they both had started to look at you with the same hardened, cold eyes, hers an exact replica of his own, a chilling blue that you used to stare at when he would be reading in bed with you, because when he looked up the sun would hit them and turn them crystal clear. Remember hearing them leaving together without a word as you would be in the kitchen cooking dinner, or in the kids' rooms reading to them, or cleaning up the mess in the living room. Remember how they would come back, walking in silently, neither of them greeting you. How you would ask him what they were doing and he would brush it off, shrugging his shoulders and scrunching his nose, the same thing Janie did when she lied about doing her homework. And then came more distance, and one day you stopped wearing your ring to see if he would notice, if he would even care. Remember how after a week you slipped it back on, and it was clear that he was far gone, that there was nothing you could do to get him attention back, that maybe the man you thought he was had never been there at all.

Let there be silence. Lean forward, place your hands on her shoulders. Wonder what she could be thinking, what he could have done to upset her so badly. Then watch as she walks out of the kitchen because she doesn't want to hear anything else that you have to say, she's done. Feel an inkling of fear creep into your body, you had expected her to yell at you, to say a lot worse than she had. Wonder when the explosion will come, because even though she may not be close to you, you know your daughter, and you know that this isn't it, that there is a temper inside of her that builds until it bursts all at once. Feel your chest tighten, your heart sink, feel the control that you once had over your home leave with her, because you have no power over what she will do any more, or when she will do it. Know that now, you just have to wait.

Sit there, let your head fall between your hands. Wait for him to get home.

Car Talks

I.

Janie, I'm trying to help you calm down.

I'm not going to calm down.

You didn't need to do that, back there.

I didn't plan on breaking anything. It just happened.

Why did you do it, though?

It was because of her, what she said.

What did she say?

She just made a comment, earlier, when we were in the baby's room. I hadn't seen the room yet, and when I walked in I was surrounded by all of the stuff that she has picked out for the baby — and there's a lot.

And?

While we were standing there, I was just looking around, and mom was commenting on everything. Then she said something about how she's "just so excited to have a little girl to give all of this to".

Oh, no...She probably didn't think about what she said.

You can't defend that.

...

So she said it, and the worst part is that I don't even think that she noticed that what she said was wrong. She just kept standing there, looking at everything. Then I saw the little glass box with that bracelet in it, and I just couldn't look at it all any longer.

So you smashed it?

Like I said, I really don't know what came over me.

Well, we're going to have to figure it out.

What is there to talk about? I'll pay for a new box.

That bracelet wasn't replaceable, Janie.

I know that. Mom told me that for a long time, when it was in your room.

So why would you break it, if you knew?

The baby probably would have broken it anyways.

You being stubborn isn't going to get us anywhere. You're acting like a child.

I'm not acting like a child. Don't you see how she already treats the boys from me? Imagine a girl. I mean, just look at the baby's room and think about how mine was when I was a kid. I asked her all the time when I was little to wear her stuff like that bracelet. She would never say yes. Now I know she just wanted to save it in case a better one came along.

As much as you may feel like that, you can't be breaking things and freaking out. It'll never work with her.

So you're saying you see it, too? That there's something that needs to change?

I don't know, Janie.

Bullshit.

Watch it.

I feel like I'm going insane.

You aren't going insane.

I'm fifteen and just vandalized the room meant for my sister who hasn't even been born yet.

You let your emotions get the better of you, it happens. Your mother used to be more like that, too.

Used to be?

She's gotten more controlled as she's gotten older. More hardened exterior. Doesn't show too much to the outside.

Why, though?

I think she just wants everything to be a certain way. Or, at least, have the appearance of being so.

That seems like a lot of work.

It is. That's why you're having these emotions, it isn't a bad thing. You just need to be able to handle them a little better, and understand how she is. Once she has her mind set on something it's very hard to change her perspective.

...

What are you thinking?

That I don't fit into that perfect image that she has in her mind.

You really think that's how it is?

I don't know, seems like it. And once this new baby is actually here, you can forget about me, about the fact that there are two daughters in this family.

Janie, nobody is going to forget about you.

She already has.

Well, I haven't. And I won't, you can trust me on that.

II.

Thanks for coming with me.

Of course. Where are we going?

Up to you. Maybe just drive for a bit.

Okay.

Tell me about you, how is everything?

What do you mean, everything?

School, friends, boys.

You think I want to talk to you about boys?

If that's what's happening with you.

You never ask me about what's going on with me.

So tell me now.

I guess..I don't know. School's fine. Boys are fine, I guess, there's some I'm interested in, but that isn't important. Friends are the same, you know I've never had a ton. Keep to myself mostly.

Why's that?

I don't like all the stuff they do. Going out, drinking, partying. I don't feel the need. Right now I'm focusing on other things.

Why don't you like all of that?

A lot of reasons. I've always wanted to stay in and make sure I do well in school, because I've always wanted to leave for college, and go far away from all of this.

I didn't know that you wanted to go away from home.

Yeah, I guess nobody has ever really asked. I've just been through a lot, being here. I've always felt like I'm an outsider, and when it comes to the people at school, that won't change any time soon. I don't think like them.

How do you think differently from them?

I'm more mature than them, I'd say.

How so?

I feel like I've grown up a lot, dealing with everything at home, and not really ever being the most social person. And I handle that in a more mature way, I put all my frustrations into school itself so I can actually get out of here and leave my problems. Not drink to ignore them. Why are you questioning it so much?

Janie, it's okay to go out sometimes, and to be with friends. And you know, not everyone is drinking or partying, and not everyone who does is for that reason. You should get out of the house more.

What, you don't want me home?

No, that isn't it. I like having you around. I just think it's nice to have something else. I wish I had that option to get away every now and then.

You're rarely home, though. You're always at work.

That doesn't mean I enjoy it.

So why go there so much, then? Why not go out with your friends or something?

I don't think your mother would like that very much.

Why not?

She doesn't like letting go of control very much.

Why does she get to decide that for you though?

She doesn't get to decide for me, I just decide to do what's going to make my life at home more relaxing. I don't want to upset her, it just makes things worse.

Is that what happened today?

What do you mean?

You think I don't hear you guys? You were pretty loud. Then you took me out on this car ride, I can put two and two together.

I'm sorry.

I just wish you would talk to me up front about it. You think I wouldn't understand?

I know you would understand. You actually listen, and think from many sides of it.

So don't be afraid to talk to me. Last time I was the one with a problem, tell me yours this time.

Janie-

Come on. I'm just returning the favor. And I was unreasonably angry, you helped me, and we're the only ones who really get this stuff. It would be nice, anyways, to hear someone else who's having issues with her.

It—I don't know—I'm upset about some decisions she has made.

Okay, and?

And what?

Why are you upset about that?

I just don't have a voice, when it comes to her. She gets upset with me over the smallest things, and wants to make sure that I'm a certain way, her way. But that's the issue, everything is always her way.

I've noticed that. I thought it was just me.

Really?

I always felt like we were so different. Even when I was little, it was like there was this pressure to act a certain way, and I didn't like that. I didn't get it, when I was little, why I felt so anxious all the time when she would give me advice, or tell me to do certain things and act a certain way.

I didn't know you felt like that.

I didn't really, either, until I looked back on it. I knew though, it was like I was a problem to her that she needed to fix for some reason. I became an issue to her then, when I wouldn't change to how she wanted me to be. So after she had Tommy, it was like I was invisible.

I don't know, Janie.

Come on, you're saying you don't see any of it? That she hasn't treated me any different than the others? Even this new baby, I already see it happening. I told you it would happen, too, and you didn't believe me.

You still have me, no matter what you feel.

I don't get why you won't just admit that it's different, the way she treats us.

Because, Janie, I didn't just take you out so that we could shit on your mother.

You aren't answering my question.

It's a hard question to answer.

Yes or no, simple.

It doesn't matter if it's a yes or no, though, because at the end of the day she will be the same no matter what you do. So it's best to keep your head down and go along with the simple stuff.

Is that what you've been doing this whole time that you've been with her? Keeping to yourself, never speaking up for yourself?

This isn't appropriate, Janie.

I want to know how you feel. Knowing it may be similar to me could help.

I'm not trying to make your relationship with her worse.

Well, telling me may hurt my relationship with her, but not telling me would hurt ours. Which would you rather?

...

...

Your mother is a hard-headed woman. I never had much of a say.

Why, though? How is she able to so easily control you?

Once you get kids into the mix, it's hard. When you're the one at work all day every day, and she's the one at home, making sure things run smoothly. We do work well together, really.

Except for the fact that you're a doormat.

Don't talk to me like that.

So you can fight back against me, but not her?

You're my child, not my wife.

I just don't get it. You act like she makes all these decisions for you and controls your life, but then you don't do anything about it, and then say it actually works for you? So what, are you happy or not with her?

It's more complicated than that.

Not really. I know for me, yeah, she's been a good mother to me. She raised me, clothed me, never did anything to harm me-but did she really love me?

Your mother loves you.

Not the way she does with the other kids. Like I said, I always needed to change for her. Now she has this new girl, and she's going to make it right.

But really, do you want to make that connection with her now?

I don't know if I can.

It's been almost twenty years for me, Janie, and I still haven't.

Oh.

...

...

I shouldn't have said that.

I wanted to know.

I think we should stop talking about this, for now.

III.

What do you think about me going out of state for school?

I thought you wanted to stay close, get in state tuition.

There's just so much going on here.

Like what?

Friends, boys, family. It's a lot, and I just kind of want to get away.

That's not very specific.

I want space from home, for a chance to make new friends. And here, I've given up on the people.

Did something happen?

Do you really want to hear about it? It's about a boy.

Yes, I do.

Well, it's more than that, really.

Okay.

It's about sex.

Come on, Janie, you can talk to me about anything.

I just don't want to say too much.

I want to know.

Okay, well — I've been talking to this guy. Which is new for me. We've been hanging out every now and then for a while now-like, consistently for months-and I've actually been having fun. I put myself out there with him, because he made me feel like I could be comfortable with him.

That's good then, right?

Well, no. He just got really distant a couple weeks back, and I tried not to question it because he seemed so interested before. But yesterday, I found out he has been talking to multiple girls, not just me.

Oh, no.

So I talked to him about it on the phone earlier, and tried to confront him, but he was completely immature about it. He was saying how we aren't officially dating, and nothing he did was wrong, but I think that it was messed up to lead me on and think I wouldn't be mad when I found out he was talking to other girls.

Would you say it was actually serious, or did you think it was serious because you didn't know any different?

It seemed serious, the way he was talking to me when we would hang out. And we hung out at least twice every week, and talked on the phone a lot too. From a boy's perspective, do you really think that it was okay?

I mean, when I was younger I probably would have thought nothing of it. Especially not in high school, if things weren't official.

It's not like that. He knew this was a big deal for me.

You guys discussed that?

Yes, we did. He knows that I haven't had a boyfriend before-

But he isn't your boyfriend.

Well, he said he wanted to be. But maybe that was because of everything between me and him.

Everything?

One of the last times we hung out, it got more...intimate. He knew I was a virgin the whole time that we were talking and hanging out, and he was okay with it. At least, that's what he said. I should have known, though.

Known what?

He said he could see himself dating me and all that. He also said he wanted to make sure that my...first time, that it would be good. Because he cared about me so much.

But he didn't ever really ask you to be his girlfriend.

Nope. And he had more experience than I did, and I thought that maybe he just wanted to see how it was before he asked, or that the timing was off. And at that point, I kind of wanted to just get it over with.

I'm assuming you said yes.

Yeah, I lost my virginity to him that day, and then a couple days later he completely distanced himself. Which is kinda shitty, don't you think? But it feels good to tell someone, I haven't told anyone that that happened. And even though it sucks, it was exciting. I just don't even know what to do anymore, when it comes to him.

Probably nothing you can do, really. I think that it really would be best to just move on from it, he doesn't sound worth this stress at all.

So you're saying he dated me for months, said all those nice things to me, just to have sex one time and dump me?

Like you said, it probably wasn't just you. And as much as that sucks, you need to accept that and move forward.

Well that's pretty messed up then.

Look, the kid sounds like all talk, typical teenage boy with a list of girls he wants to go down without commitment. You need to watch out for stuff like this, because it really frustrates me thinking that you're going to be hung up on a guy who's taking advantage of you.

You keep sounding like you're putting the blame on me.

I'm not blaming you for what he did, but I think you need to be careful with who you're choosing. Yeah, someone may be all fun and games when you're young, but you don't want to end up with someone like that.

I'm not saying I wanted to marry him, Jesus.

You could. And you chose to have sex with him, wanted to have a relationship with him, clearly you wanted some sort of commitment. Where do you think dating ends up?

Why are you taking this so far?

Because if you're going to try and be with someone, you need to make sure you have something real between you two. Don't waste your time on just anyone, Janie.

I don't think I'm wasting my time.

You just refuse to see where you had a lapse in judgement. Your mom does stuff like that, where she's totally unreasonable and doesn't have the self reflection to think that she is wrong. Trust me, I've known her for since college, and I've seen plenty of her decisions go wrong-I know you have too. But, she will never own up to it.

Don't compare me to her.

I'm trying to help you.

You know, I thought it was actually going to be nice to open up to you. I haven't ever been able to talk to someone, especially not my parents, about something important like this. But now you're just turning it back to you and mom, once again.

I'm not trying to tell you it's your fault.

Really? Because that's exactly how it sounds to me. I should have noticed the warning signs? I should have made sure we had a connection? How the hell was I supposed to just know that stuff?

You're right. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that.

So why did you? I wanted to tell you because you've been good at helping me through with this all.

I'm glad you feel like you can tell me, I am. I'm just getting upset because I don't want you to get hurt by anyone, or mistreated, and this kid just doesn't sound worth it.

But now he means something to me, you see that?

It doesn't need to mean something like that, though. You don't need to feel this strong connection to him just because your relationship seems a certain way, or because you did something meaningful together. I mean, if I had known that a long time ago, maybe I would have ended up in a very different situation.

You keep bringing that up, you know.

Bringing what up?

You and mom, back then and now.

I guess seeing you starting to have your own relationships brings a lot back for me.

So what, did you not look out for all those warning signs? Are you telling me that so that I don't make the same mistake you did?

I just want to tell you what I would have wanted someone to tell me.

Can I ask you; why did you even stay together out of college? How did you get here?

We had a lot of fun in college together. But we also didn't realize how hard real life is, how much the fun goes away when you're dealing with work, kids, and money.

But why do you think you were never connected to each other?

I think we liked each other because we were fun together, not because we had mutual interests and values. Life should be fun, Janie, but it needs to be purposeful. When you're looking for someone, you should have a good time together, but it shouldn't be so hard to make big decisions.

So what big decisions do you guys have trouble making?

I don't know, Janie. When to get married, where we live, kids in general. The big things.

And she controls all that for you.

I had to stop caring about if she did a long time ago.

Hm.

What?

Just thinking.

About?

I have a theory.

What is it?

I don't think you wanted this baby to come any more than I did.

...

You can say it, you know. It's not a bad thing.

It's a terrible thing, to not want a child.

Why did you choose to have her, then?

I didn't.

Well, there's nothing wrong with how you feel, then.

I shouldn't-that-

I get it. I would have stayed out of the house, too. I would have wanted to leave.

I thought about it.

Why didn't you?

How could I do that to you?

IV.

You seem kinda tense.

I'm not tense.

You never drive like that, sitting straight up, both hands on the wheel.

You're perceptive today.

...

So, I was talking to your mother, earlier-

Oh god.

She told me you've applied to all out of state schools? You told her and not me?

You didn't ask, and it isn't a big deal. We don't know anything for sure yet.

It'd be pretty sad if you went far from home.

Some days I think I need to. For a fresh start, so I can just do my own thing. Not have my parents too close by.

Ah.

Sorry. I didn't mean-

Don't be. I didn't want to be close to home either. I just thought you would end up closer to home. I wanted you to.

Why, though? Don't you want me to get away from the stuff that upsets me? All the bullshit I've put up with while I've lived here?

You're leaving me, too.

You could come.

I have a job here, Janie. And the rest of the family. Besides, what would that mean for me? Does that mean I leave your mother? Separate from her?

Maybe that's what would be best for you. This could be the perfect time for you, really.

There's more people involved in this than just me.

Well, I don't want to stay close to home. That's certain.

I'm the one paying for this, you know.

What, now that you want me to stay here you're going to take my choice away from me?

You make me sound bad here.

You're asking a lot of me, to stay somewhere I'm unhappy just to make you happier.

I guess I just thought that after these past few years that our relationship would be enough to make you want to stay.

I know that, but I can't just stay here for you.

Think about it. I have a good job, I can get you an in early on, you can work there while you're still in school. You'll make enough money to save up and do whatever you want. And then, you can graduate-

And what? Still stay close to home for you? Move into an apartment and keep a room spare for you so you don't have to deal with your wife? At some point you're going to have to face her yourself, not just use me as an escape.

Hmph.

Why don't you just leave her?

...

You *could* do it, you know.

I know. I think about it, sometimes. Handing her the papers, getting my own place, to get rid of all that rigidity and structure for me and you guys.

We could do that. If you came with me, you wouldn't have to worry about the consequences. We would be far enough away from it all. Say you want to make sure I'm safe when I'm gone, at least for the first year, and then stay.

I can imagine it now, escaping here, being able to finally do what we want and live our lives our way.

It could be really great.

I know it would be.

So why don't we do it?

Janie...I can't.

But you were just saying —

It just wouldn't be that easy.

If you're so unhappy, why not?

There's other children involved.

Children who you don't connect with. Not like me, not like this. You told me yourself you didn't even want them, she did.

I didn't tell you that for you to use against me. And it isn't like I don't love them.

Not like you love me. You don't do this with any of them, do you?

You aren't sacrificing your relationships with your whole family if you stay. I do if I leave.

But I would be sacrificing my future, my goals, my sanity.

Don't be dramatic. College is college.

So you'll ask me to sacrifice for you, but not you for me?

This conversation is over.

I'm not done.

I've already sacrificed a lot for you. More than you know.

Oh really, when? All those days that you were at the office until late at night when I was growing up? All those school events that you missed? Even now, you still do that, just to get away from this home, wife, and baby that you don't want. I told you I understand that, and I do, but you just got interested in my life a few years ago when I began to spiral. You got me when I was low, but you never kept me from getting there.

Don't push it.

You think that I owe you it all because you've been there for me right before I got old enough to leave. So no, please tell me everything you have sacrificed for me. Maybe then I'll reconsider my decision.

Fine.

So?

I never wanted to have you, either.

You-

You were an accident. We were young, having fun, about to come out of college and into the real world. She said found out too late to do anything. Seeing what your mother did now, I'm sure it was all planned. My parents were religious and never would have approved of any other option. We stayed together because of you.

So I'm the reason you're so unhappy now.

That's not what I'm saying. I'm saying I gave up everything for you.

Exactly. You sacrificed everything you could have had in your future to stay together and have me. You stayed with someone you never really loved because of me.

I did love her, Janie.

Did.

She wasn't the one for me. But we ended up together.

Because of me.

You wanted to know.

I know. Just give me a minute.

Okay.

...

What are you thinking?

I'm happy you told me.

Happy?

Yes.

You don't seem happy.

Overwhelmed, maybe, but still. I mean, I'm glad you trust me enough to tell me this. It's your best kept secret. For so long, she's tried to keep up this image that we're the perfect family. But we never have been, not since the beginning. It started out wrong. And now it all makes sense to me, the way that she's treated me for so long. I wasn't wanted.

She did want you, in a way.

She wanted me to keep me around. And now we can throw it back at her.

What do you mean?

She used me to keep you around, then I'll be the one to take you away, too.

Janie, I told you all of this because I wanted you to stay. Not so we could plan revenge on your mother.

Bullshit.

You bullshit. I tell you my secrets that I've kept for so long to keep everyone around us happy, and then you still ask me to give up my life for you? No, you owe me more than that.

I don't owe you anything.

I've done so much for you. I'm your father, don't forget that.

No you're not.

You're the one who wanted to talk so much about all of this. You're the one who got me to open up about it, to tell you everything. Does what I've told you mean nothing to you? How much I've opened up to you? And now you're going to hold all of that against me?

...

What would people think, me leaving my wife with three small children and following my oldest daughter to college? How is it fair to ask me to deal with all of that?

This is what I mean. You can't even stand up for yourself because you're so concerned with what others will think. You're letting everyone else control your life for you.

That isn't true.

You want to prove me wrong? Then man up, get on a plane, act like an adult and do what you actually want to do.

I'm not strong enough to do that. And that's why I want you to stay.

You choose to stay, you choose her over me. And honestly? I don't even know if I would even want you to come any more.

What?

Why would I want you to come? You have this opportunity to get your life where you want it to be, and you aren't mature enough to take it. Meanwhile, I'm standing up for what I want while you guilt trip me into not doing it.

You're pushing it.

I'm being honest with you, something you clearly can't do. Why would I want you to come with me when I can't hardly respect you right now?

I want you to respect me. I want you to want to be close with me, that's why I'm doing all of this.

I don't think I can. You've shown me who you really are, and you're choosing her over me.

It isn't that simple, Janie.

It is.

You can't just do this to me and then leave.

Watch me.

V.

Are you nervous?

No. I'm excited.

That's good. You should be, it'll be a great new chapter of your life.

Glad that you approve of it.

I'm happy for you.

I'm sure.

When you're there, you'll keep in touch, right?

You really want me to keep in touch with you?

Yes, of course.

What, like call you?

Sure. Every now and then.

I'll be pretty busy.

Too busy to call me?

Yep.

Please don't be like this.

Like what?

You're angry with me.

I am.

We barely spend any time together any more.

I thought I made it clear where I stood at the end of our last conversation.

I didn't think that was enough to make you want to cut yourself off from me.

You never even apologized.

I'm not sorry. I'm sorry that it's made you this angry at me. But I'm not sorry for telling you what I did. I still do want you to stay here.

That's exactly what I'm talking about. What happened to what you just said before, about it being a great new chapter of my life?

I'm just trying to make you happy, Janie.

I would rather you were honest with me.

I don't want you to leave things like this, with so much tension between us.

Why do you care so much? I'm going to leave and it'll be like nothing even happened. You can go about your life the same way you did before, and I'll do my own thing somewhere else.

I don't want you to be mad at me. I want to keep the bond between us that we've had.

Why, though? So you have someone to complain to about your problems all the time, without actually having to take action?

No, because I like being close to you.

And now you aren't.

I wish you would stay.

It's too late for that.

So what, you don't want any contact now? You just want me to pretend like you were never around?

I really need a break from everything here. I need to figure myself out.

Please don't stay mad at me. You have to understand how hard this has been for me.

You can't just ask me to change my feelings so you can feel better about your bad decisions.

Don't act like this doesn't affect you either, remember when you were begging me to come with you? And you were the one who wanted me to leave with you? There's no way you suddenly just want me to leave you alone forever.

The reasons that you wouldn't come with me showed me just who you really are. The way that you acted towards me showed who you are. I thought that you were mature, someone who could actually handle our problems well. But it turns out you aren't and I don't want to deal with that anymore, I've had enough experience dealing with a parent who is unreasonable in their emotions for far too long.

I can't let you get out of this car knowing that you're leaving hating me.

I have a flight to catch. You can't keep me in this car, this town, this state, forever with you.

..

I really thought that you would have left, at the very last second. I almost expected you to have your own suitcase packed today alongside mine.

I thought you didn't want me to come with you?

You would have wanted that?

I don't know what I want anymore.

I don't either.

You had the choice with me, you know? I was giving you the option to stay or to leave, and you've never had that before. It isn't even that you didn't come, I'm not mad about that anymore. I'm mad that you never even appreciated that I gave a choice to you at all.

...

...

I'm sorry. I really am.

Thank you.

I love you, Janie.

Not enough.

Drinking Games

What am I doing here?

Janie stood in the corner of the dimmed room, leaning back against the stairs. She watched the boys in front of her as they leaned around a plastic table lined with red solo cups, yelling at one another and ignoring the girls behind them. One of the boys made the shot, and as he gulped down his drink it poured down and left a large wet mark on his chest. She took a sip out of the water bottle she had brought from home, coughed from the bitter taste in her throat, then took another for good measure.

If I have enough, I'll be able to stop seeing this so clearly.

She didn't act like that when she was drinking, she didn't get rowdy like them. She didn't understand why they felt the need to be so loud about how intoxicated they were feeling, about how little they were thinking. She simply liked to stop talking and to listen to the world around her, to drown out her thoughts and let herself melt away. Them, though, they liked to act like children, and announce to the world each thought and feeling that came to them in that moment.

One of the boys at the table disconnected himself from the crowd and began to walk over to her, but she didn't notice. Her eyes had glazed over and distantly looked at the couple locked together on the couch, staring intensely at the boy's drink that slowly spilled from his hand onto the rug as he leaned into his partner.

"Now, what a sight this is. Janie at a party."

Janie snapped out of her trance and turned her head towards the drawl that arose from next to her, recognizing its sound all too quickly. Their eyes locked, her heart jumped. She took a sip from her bottle.

“Oh good, it’s you.”

“Didn’t expect it to be?” He raised his eyebrows at her. “If anything, you’re the last person I would have expected to see here.”

“Not that.” She hadn’t expected him to walk over to her, to talk to her. They hadn’t talked in years, not since everything that had happened back then, and she wasn’t sure if she was in the right place to talk to him now. *His hair was longer.* She didn’t know why she noticed this, or why she liked it. She wondered why he had let it grow since he had graduated. She wondered if he had thought of her since then, before this. He ran the fingers of his free hand through it now, ruffling the long front pieces out of his eyes.

“Then what?”

“I just don’t really feel like seeing you.”

“Okay then, don’t see me I guess.” He shrugged, turning around. She felt her stomach sink.

“Charlie, wait!” She called out, grabbing his arm and flipping her back towards her. He was always stubborn, it made her want to yell at him.

“Wait, what?”

“Well-why don’t you care about seeing me?”

He laughed, staring down at her with his eyebrows raised. “I did, until you just blew me off.”

“What did you expect?”

“A smile, maybe? You’ve been standing over here glaring at everyone all night.”

“I wasn’t glaring.”

“You were, a little.”

“What, were you watching me?” She silently hoped to herself, just a little bit, that he had been, she liked that he had seen her. Nobody at these ever acted like they did. They were all blinded by their own preoccupations, and just as most kids her age, they were selfish. Nobody wanted to be stuck talking to the girl who came to the parties and drank on her own, so they all just left her alone. Which was usually what she wanted, anyways, than to be stuck making small talk.

“Not watching, but you aren’t hard to spot. You’re the only one over here.”

“I like it like that.”

“What, you don’t like talking to people any more?”

“Did I ever, really?”

“Yeah, guess not.” He took a sip out of his own cup, looking her up and down. “You look good.”

“Now *that’s* not true.”

“You do.”

“Thanks, Charlie.” She rolled her eyes, now really unsure if she actually wanted him there.

“Why are you at a party then, if you don’t want to socialize?”

“So I can drink somewhere outside of my house. With people around, too.” Janie turned her head away again, letting her hair block his face in her peripheral vision as the sounds of the

room filled the air around them. She drank from her bottle, resisting the urge to look and see if he was still there, or if he had given up on her as she spoke again. “Why’d you even come over to me?”

“To say hi.”

“You really left all your buddies to say hi?” Back in high school he wouldn’t have been damned to leave a group of guys for her. She had always felt hidden away when it came to him, nobody had ever really known they had talked besides her own father. She had told him that she liked it that way, things kept private, but the idea of him leaving a group in such a public place to talk to her was far more appealing.

“You could come join us instead of standing over here on your own.”

“No thanks, I’m good.”

“And why is that?”

“I told you, I like being on my own.”

“It just doesn’t seem very fun that way.”

She groaned. “Look, Charlie, if you’re just going to act like your idea of what’s fun or not at a party is better than mine because you stand around and play beer pong with those guys, then you can go.”

“Nobody’s acting like they’re better than you, Janie. If anything, you’re acting like you’re better than the rest of us, standing over here like there’s nobody good enough for you to hang out with. What’s that about?”

Janie liked the look that he got in his eyes when he said this. She felt like he was reading her, the way that his gaze trailed back and forth across her face, like he couldn't get inside her head. Every time before with him she had felt like an open book, someone who had just been waiting to open up - and so easily, too. Now he had to pry her open.

He had always had nice eyes. But with his accusation they looked hardened, the golden brown searching intensely for a way to dig into her mind. She could tell that the drink had kicked in enough that she could get something interesting out of him. When they were seventeen she wasn't able to talk to him like this. Though maybe it was because she hadn't been drunk back then.

"Do you actually want to hear my thoughts right now?"

"Try me."

"Then sit down with me." She didn't ask. She led him over to the empty sofa next to the couple that had now disentangled themselves, peering back at the game going on behind them with their arms around each other. She turned in to him, her back to the room.

"If we're actually going to talk, for real, we need to drop the judgement and hostility."

"Janie," He groaned. "I'm not the hostile one."

"Right, you're the judgmental one."

He went silent, narrowing his eyes at her over the rim of his cup, pressed to his lips. He didn't argue, and she grinned for the first time, biting her lower lip and raising her eyebrows in playful invitation.

"So we don't say anything that's rude, okay? And if we do, we drink."

“We drink anyways, don’t we?”

“Just be a *little* fun, Charlie. Come on.”

“That was rude. Drink.” He smirked. She drank. “Now really, tell me why you like to stand at the parties but not be a part of them?”

She sighed. “I just don’t like why everyone here acts the way they do. I mean, look at Nathan,” She gestured to the boy who had made the shot earlier, now chugging another beer. “I know for a fact that his dad just got out of rehab, and he hasn’t spoken to him in months. Everyone said he was on some business thing over in Europe, but really, he was there. Apparently he would go out on the weekends and party harder than any of these kids do.”

At this, Nathan slammed his empty can onto the table, knocking the empties that surrounded the table onto the ground, tiny brown droplets spilling over his girlfriend’s white sneakers. She opened her mouth to speak, but he didn’t look at her, instead turning around to grab another beer from the cooler behind them. Janie took another sip of her drink, wondering why she would stay with a guy who noticed a can of liquid more than he noticed his own girlfriend.

“Okay, and?”

Janie ignored him. “And over on the left side, the guy in the blue frat shirt? His parents are swingers. So are half these kids’ parents, I’m sure. But the whole town knows his parents, and they’ve messed up a lot of marriages from what I know.”

“So what, you’re saying that you don’t like these kids because they have screwed up parents?”

“I’m saying everyone here has something kind of fucked up going on in their home lives. And nobody is acknowledging that that’s why they feel the need to come here, get ridiculously drunk, and act like idiots. They’re just hiding from themselves.”

“And what about you? You think that everyone should just come to parties and stand in silence, getting drunk and acting like nobody else there exists?”

“That was rude, too. Drink.” She paused. “At least I’m not here pretending that everything is great.”

He leaned back, taking a long sip out of his cup. “I don’t think you get it though. Not everyone here is drinking because there’s something wrong or pretending that things are okay. I mean, they all have their own stuff, yeah, but that doesn’t mean they’re all drinking because of that.”

He could have had a point, but she didn’t want him to.

“Maybe you’re just holding yourself back from actually enjoying one of these parties, have you thought of it like that?”

She hadn’t, but she wasn’t going to tell him that.

“It isn’t like that, Charlie.”

“What do you do at school, do you go out there?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“And you do the same thing that you did tonight, that you have been doing all summer?”

It sounded like he had noticed her more times than just tonight, but she didn’t want to say that. Her stomach felt lighter when he said it, though.

“No, I don’t. But I have friends there.”

“You could have friends here too, Janie. You always could have.” He paused, looking down at his drink, then back at her. “I’m not trying to be mean saying this, but I think that you’re making yourself an outsider by standing on the sidelines and isolating yourself, thinking that you know everything about everyone here.”

“It isn’t like I would want to be friends with anyone here. Or that I ever have.” Janie poured the contents of her bottle into her mouth, allowing herself a big gulp. He watched as she did this, and when she opened her eyes from her disgusted grimace at the taste they locked with his. He had freckles around his eyes, freckles that she remembered seeing when they would lay on his couch together after school. One time she had asked to count them, but she always lost track. She wondered if maybe she could get away with counting them now.

“Look, I’m an outsider around these guys now, and I still come to these. I haven’t been doing the same thing as them, and I know that that’s affected a lot, and it sucks. But I also know that it’s about what I put into it. I can’t expect them to keep me in their inner circle when I’m not doing the same things that they are.”

“But how is that good friendship? Shouldn’t they be more inclusive of you if they’re actually your friends?” She shook her head from side to side. “And why are you an outsider? Everyone loved you in high school.”

“They all went to school, I stayed here with my dad. I work in his shop.”

She wondered what that was like, to be here after high school, but not in school. She wondered if she would have liked that, if things would have turned out differently if she had

stayed like her father had once asked her to. Then she looked back at Charlie, pushing the thought of him out of her head. Now was not the time.

“So is that the thing that you’re drinking about when you come to these? Get drunk enough that you don’t feel like an outsider any more?”

“Why would I tell you that, after the speech you just gave me?”

“I’m not judging you for it. I’m just saying, you’re the only one who came over to talk to the girl who stands alone at parties, aren’t you?” She looked over him, waiting for a reaction.

“Again, we feel the same about something here, I just don’t hide it.”

“No, I don’t think that’s true, either.”

“And why’s that?”

“Well, you clearly want someone to talk to, otherwise you wouldn’t come around people at all. You’re always running the risk that someone’s going to talk to you.”

“I told you, I’m just trying to get out of my house.”

“You could drink in your backyard.”

“You’re too funny.”

His face cracked open into a smile, not a smirk, but a full smile that was drunken and sloppy and made her laugh. She didn’t know why, maybe because the conversation had gotten kind of stupid, maybe just as stupid as the people playing their own drinking games behind them. Or maybe it was that neither of them had smiled that hard before that moment, and there had been a tension culminating between them that had finally been broken.

“So why are you drinking tonight, Janie?” They had settled back into their seats, both taking a drink. Not because they had been rude, but because they wanted to.

“Everything.”

“Sounds like a lot to handle.”

“Funny.” She took another sip. *I wish I had more left.* She wasn’t quite sure she really wanted to answer, but looking at him now, she felt like she could. He felt warmer now than he had before. It felt like he was truly interested now, not just talking to her because he hadn’t seen her, or because he wanted to hook up with her and ditch her again. “My home life has not been the best this summer. I like to drink, I don’t like to think. I come to these, I get drunk, I watch everyone, I go home.”

“So you *are* just like everyone else here.”

“I made an observation earlier that is proving to be more and more accurate. And it may be based on knowledge from my own situation, yes. But, like I said, I’m not dancing around pretending like I don’t have a care in the world while it’s all falling apart behind closed doors.”

“What’s going on?” He sounded concerned. *Was he actually, though?* Or was this just another time like back then, when he had told her how much he liked her, how much he wanted to be with her, how she didn’t compare to anyone else even though he was talking to other people at the same time. He had seemed to care, back then, but she had seen how that went. The way he looked now didn’t look like he did before, though, back when he had given her eyes that were too charming to be trusted. Now they seemed open, inviting. Or maybe that was the drink softening them, inviting her in.

“My parents are separated, at the moment.”

He leaned in a little now, resting his arm over the back of the couch as he moved forward. If Janie moved towards him just a little more, she could be leaning against it. She wasn't quite sure, though, if that's why he had shifted position. Maybe he didn't know what to say, and he was urging her to say more. Maybe it was just more comfortable there, instead of resting his full body against it, crushing it against the couch pillows. But she preferred to think that he did it to be just a little closer to her, because he wanted her to move in towards him, too.

“I've been there, too,” he spoke, breaking through her thoughts.

“Really?” She had never met his parents when they had been together. He had always had her over when nobody else was home, and she never questioned if someone ever would be. They never asked each other questions like that.

“I was a kid, though. I don't really remember it too clearly, except for what happened after. My mom left my dad for a guy with the money that my dad didn't and still doesn't have. My dad, he's a good guy, she just didn't care enough to try with him. Or me. It wasn't worth losing her new lifestyle.”

They were silent for a moment. Janie thought it over, how her parents had held on for so long. Despite how they felt, they had continued on with their lives together. Neither of them had ever left, not really. Even now, neither of them had made the decision to end it for good.

“Do you think she ever really loved him, if it was that easy to move on?” She asked softly.

He looked at her with glassy eyes and shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not sure. But then again, who knows what kind of caring she was capable of. I mean, what does all that say about how she felt towards me? Her own kid? She let him cut me out just as easily."

"It says that she's a coward." She watched his face, but he showed nothing. "Do I need to drink, for that?"

"No, you don't." He drank instead.

"I mean, trust me, I get it too. My mom was never the best with me or my dad."

"Is that why they're separated, now?"

"Kind of." She paused. "My dad cheated on her. They hadn't been doing great for a long time."

"Were they fighting a lot, before that?"

"No, no, nothing like that." She shook her head, playing with the lid of her bottle. She realized that she hadn't checked the time for a while. "I wouldn't have even known that it was coming if my dad hadn't told me everything."

"What do you mean, told you everything?"

"Everything about him and my mom. Our thing was car rides. He would take me out whenever one of us was overwhelmed and we would just vent to each other about whatever it was that was bothering us."

The way he looked at her now was different. The intensity in his eyes had changed from curiosity to concern, and he looked at her with his head cocked just slightly to the left.

"That's interesting."

“Interesting?”

“I’m trying to not be judgmental right now.”

They looked at each other for a moment, and Janie’s eyes flickered down to his cup. It was almost empty.

“It’s just-I don’t know, Janie, that’s doesn’t feel right for him to talk to you about him and your mom. Not when you’re his kid.” Before she had the chance to respond, he drank. “You just aren’t supposed to do that.”

“I vented to him about her, too, we were just the only people who really understood it. Who understood each other, like that.” She didn’t like what she knew he was thinking. “Besides, I told him stuff about my relationships, too, it wasn’t like it was all him. We just talked about all that together, he was the only person I had, and I was his.”

“Wait, hold on,” Charlie shook his head lightly, moving away from her as he leaned back into the cushion. “Relationships meaning *us*?”

“I mean, yeah.”

“What did you tell him about us?”

“I told you this already,” she groaned, rolling her head backwards in frustration. “I told him *everything*. Meaning everything. The good, the bad, the virginity. All of it.”

He shook his head again, running the hand that had rested on the couch over his forehead and through his hair. “Now that’s odd, Janie.”

“You were the one who didn’t want judgement before, but now you’re questioning my relationship with my dad?”

“I mean, look, my dad is my best friend. I get it. But that all just seems off. You have to know that that isn’t normal father daughter behavior, right? It almost sounds...I don’t know,” he trailed off, taking a small sip from his cup. Then he put his hand back behind her on the couch, and she relaxed her body slightly as she tried to read his expression with no success.

“I think he just wanted someone to talk to. He didn’t have that, any friends outside of her, or a loving wife to escape to-because she was the problem. So he came to me to talk about her, but it got to a point where I didn’t really want to talk to him about her any more, and that’s all he wanted.”

“Maybe, but that still doesn’t mean that he was right in what he was doing either, just because she was worse. Like yeah, my mom did a lot of shitty stuff, but my dad also sat on the couch drinking beer every night instead of putting me to bed for the first year after she was gone.”

She had always thought about it, after they would get out of the car and head into the house. He would go back to his room, and she would watch as he walked down the hall to where her mother was waiting. How she would hear the door shut and wonder how he could stand to go in there and put on the charade after he had just complained about her for an hour. It had felt like a betrayal, him going behind enemy lines after fighting his battle with her by his side. Was he in there, telling her mother what she had said about her? Was he complaining about Janie, tired of her after being with her for so long? He would never come to her room afterwards, would never come in there at all, unless asking her out. It was always back to his own room, back to the woman who he said he couldn’t stand. There was almost a stroke of jealousy she couldn’t help that would rush through her, burning inside of her stomach. Why did he want to be with her?

Janie would go in her room and sit on her bed, the little secrets that she had gained on their ride repeating themselves in her head. She would dissect them, thinking about them for hours, wondering how he could continue on this way. She would have to push the thoughts of what he had said to a corner of her mind, waiting to be brought back up the next time he asked her to come out with him. It was too hard to keep thinking about what he had said, she was able to let it take over her whole being. And then, there was the issue of her mother.

It was always weird afterwards, seeing her. Because the thing was, looking at her mother, Janie couldn't help but think how much better she was for him than she was. How she would get a dark feeling in her stomach where the previous jealousy had hit, feeling almost as if they had done something wrong. It felt like they were going behind her back, in a way, their covert outings, the secrets that they shared in their little car. She would see her the next morning, hair curled in perfect waves, skin glowing with the smallest amount of makeup, and she would look at herself in the mirror and search for the parts of her mother that came through in her, hoping they were noticeable.

"Janie?" Charlie's voice drifted through her thoughts, but she pushed it away.

She thought about how badly she had wanted him to come with her when she had left. That most kids couldn't wait to leave their parents behind, and she had been crying on the plane because hers had refused to come with. How she had felt almost heartbroken that day in the car, when Tommy had let the secret slip. Because he had chosen a new way out, and it hadn't been with her.

"Hey!" He shook her shoulder lightly. "Are you okay?"

She looked over at him, swaying slightly. The room around them had fallen much quieter. Most of the kids had cleared out besides the few straggling couples, like them, still talking in their designated spots. She hadn't noticed the time passing, she was unsure if they had left while she was talking or while she was thinking. She wasn't even sure when the last time she had talked was.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. I'm not trying to compare it to my situation, I know it could be different. I just feel like...I don't know." He took a drink from his cup, tilting it back all the way and draining the contents completely. "I feel like you seem burdened right now, and you shouldn't be by him."

"It's fine," she said quietly. Her mind felt as if it were in a soft haze, but it wasn't from the alcohol. "You are right."

"Please don't go. I can tell I've upset you, I'm sorry. Forget what I said."

"It's not you."

"What is it? You seem like you're lost inside your head now. Where'd you go, just then?" He leaned in towards her now, grabbing her hands between his. Her heart jumped at this, and she felt her mind beginning to move again *His hands holding mine. In this room, with these people. His eyes looking into mine, but not like they used to. They're softer now, kinder. They look like they would understand.* She wanted to tell him, she knew she did as much as she hated anyone knowing what was going on. Without her father to talk to any more, she didn't have anyone, and he really seemed like he wanted to.

"What are you thinking, Janie?"

She sighed, tracing her thumb over the back of his hand. "I'm thinking that it seems a bit ridiculous that we didn't talk for so long after everything that happened between us."

"Why do you say that?"

"Just looking back now, after everything that's been happening all summer, that's happened with me since then. It all seems very minuscule, how upset I was back then. And we were just so..."

"Immature."

"Very."

He was still diving into her eyes with his own, his head slightly tilted like he was asking her something. Janie shifted in her seat, slightly uncomfortable under the intensity of this gaze.

"It wasn't great of me though, what I did to you. You didn't deserve that."

"I know."

He half-grinned at this, the smile of a boy who got caught doing something wrong, his cheeks turning slightly pinker than they already were. "You know, I meant everything I said back then."

"Then why did you do it?"

"I wasn't ready for that."

"For what?"

"For someone as serious as you. Like you said, very immature. Not ready to handle anything very real. And it sounds cliché-but it's true."

"Well at least I know it wasn't me."

“Never.”

They stayed silent for a beat.

“And, just so you know, it’s all still true.”

Now it was Janie’s turn to blush, and she turned her head to the side, letting her hair fall over her face as she observed the nearly empty room around them. The only few left were gathered around the table, and she caught them sneaking a glimpse over at their spot on the couch. She shook her head and turned back to Charlie, but the flutter of her stomach gave away that secret pleasure she got from still being there with him.

“Should we head out of here, before someone actually kicks us out?” She asked, lifting herself off the couch with a push off of his knees.

“Yeah, we should.” He responded, using her hand to pull himself up. He let his head roll to the side slightly, laughing as it did. “I think your game worked on me.”

“We should play it more often.”

“Definitely.”

He looked down at her with a smile, throwing his arm around her shoulders. The two walked like this up the stairs and out of the house, not looking back at the empty cups they had left behind them.

The Dinner

“Well, Charlie, I wish we had known you were coming to dinner with us tonight. I would have made sure to have set the table earlier.” Amy said this with a pleasant smile plastered on her face that barely moved as she spoke. She set down the place settings in front of Charlie, who was now squeezed in on the side of Janie, one chair too many at the table.

“He doesn’t mind,” Janie said with an equally cheery smile, placing her hand on his under the table. Tom looked over at her hand moving, and shook his head, staring with hardened eyes at the boy. Janie didn’t notice.

“Yes, miss, thank you for cooking for all of us tonight.”

“You can just call me Amy, him Tom.”

“No,” Tom’s gaze remained unchanged. “He can call me Mr. Williams.”

“He’s an adult, he can call us by our first names.” Amy’s smile wilted slightly, but she held it strong. Once she was hosting her company, she didn’t like any of the imperfections to show through, no matter what the situation. Janie wondered how long that would last tonight.

“Since when have you been opposed to formality?”

“It’s not about formality, it’s about making our guest feel comfortable around us.”

“I don’t think I’m making him uncomfortable, am I making you uncomfortable?”

“No, Mr. Williams, you’re fine.”

“Please, don’t worry about what he said. You can call him whatever you feel, Tom has never been a stickler for the way that I usually liked to do things, anyways.”

Janie looked at the pair and dug into Charlie's hand, fighting herself to stay silent. From the other room she could hear her siblings, laughing loudly with audible shrieks rising through the air every few moments, cutting oddly between her parents' discussion.

"I want this to be nice for you. After all, Janie has never brought a boy over for dinner before, so she must be serious about you."

"Thanks for that, mom."

The four stared at each other from across the table for an awkward beat before Amy spoke again.

"So, why don't you tell us about you two. Where did you two meet?"

Janie knew that mother's knack for prying into the lives of others would have come up, but hadn't expected her to take such an interest in any boy that she brought home. Why did it matter when they met, anyways?

"We knew each other in high school." She let the words fall out of her mouth naturally before Charlie could speak. Not too much information, and not too little.

"We actually dated for a bit, back then."

Janie internally groaned. Another person at the table who couldn't seem to keep their mouth shut at the right times.

"You did?" Amy asked, her voice laced with confusion.

"Yes." Janie hurriedly looked over at Tom, who sat back in his chair with his arms folded. She could see the cogs working in his head, trying to place who he was, and hoped that he wouldn't figure it out. She could tell that Charlie was attempting to keep things civilized between

them all, but his efforts were largely ineffective because he was turning out to only be heightening her nerves even more. She had brought him to keep the conversation grounded, and yet the control she thought she had was slinking right out of her hands.

“When did you date my daughter?”

“Around Junior year of high school.”

“It wasn’t for very long, though.” Janie looked down, not wanting to be involved in this anymore. Maybe, if she looked away from them for long enough, they would forget she was there and stop talking about her.

“And you two have been keeping in touch, since graduating?” Amy asked.

“We actually just reconnected this summer, I saw her out and I decided to take a chance on talking to her to see how she was doing.”

Amy settled back into her seat. “You know, I don’t remember you having a boyfriend in high school. Do you remember that?”

Janie was jolted back into the conversation at this. The question was all too typical of her mother — to think that she wouldn’t remember something that happened in her own life when it had just been a few years ago. She looked up, ready to snap at her, and realized that she was looking at Tom for a response - a response Janie wasn’t quite sure she wanted to hear.

“Yeah, I do.” His voice that was slightly lowered, quieter now. He was looking across the table now, and Janie could feel him trying to imagine them a couple years back, placing the boy mentally in his mind next to the daughter he had been so close with.

“You do? How did you know that?”

“She told me about it.”

Janie stiffened, all too aware of Charlie’s presence next to her..

“You told your father about that and not me?”

“Well, yeah,” Janie said, very matter-of-fact. “It wasn’t like you were asking or anything.”

She couldn’t tell if her mother’s confusion was just another act in front of a guest, if she was trying to seem as though they had been closer. Janie had always seen how defensive she would get over her relationship with Tom when others were around. Amy opened her mouth to speak again as she looked over across the table. Her eyes locked with Charlie’s, and at this, she settled back into her easygoing, pleasant smile, relaxing her facial features back to her perfect hostess face.

“Well, I’m glad we got to meet him now.” Her voice was a little too high pitched, not matching her composure from before. “I’m going to go check on the casserole and the other kids.”

As she left the room, Tom turned to face the two.

“How did you two meet when you were in high school?”

“What do you mean? You’re the one who just told mom you remembered him.” A hint of nervousness ran through her voice. She hadn’t expected him to speak to her at all.

“I remember you talking, yes. I don’t remember details.”

Janie knew that this couldn't be true, it had been too much of a big deal for them. She read his face for any signs of recognition that he might have been hiding from her, but found nothing. Maybe he didn't know.

"He was in my classes."

"Yeah, and she was pretty shy, this one. It was hard to get her to talk to me, I had to work hard at it." Charlie nudged Janie, as if this were some inside joke between the two. She shrugged him off and wondered how far this conversation could go before she ended it.

"Janie's a tough nut to crack," Tom said, looking at his daughter. She avoided eye contact with him. "That's how she is with everyone, at first. Even me."

A fire began to burn in the pit of her stomach as he spoke.

"Yes, when I first saw her out this summer it was like we hadn't met before at all."

"Oh really, was it?"

"It was not," Janie interjected.

"Come on, you didn't want to speak to me at all at first."

That was for other reasons, not because I'm shy." Janie glanced over at Tom, still watching them with thoughtful eyes. "Can you two stop talking about me like I'm not here?"

"What other reasons?" Tom asked.

"She was still mad at me over how things ended, and I deserved it," Charlie said before she could answer. He leaned in to the table, as if about to tell a secret, and Janie's body tensed. "I was a lot different back then, and I didn't fully appreciate how great your daughter is."

"Stop." Janie said under her breath.

“It’s true, I shouldn’t have taken advantage-”

“Charlie, stop!”

She knew he was trying to help, trying to show her parents what they were missing out on by disappearing into their own mess. Unfortunately, all he had done was tell Tom the exact opposite of what she wanted him to know.

“Oh,” Tom’s face fell from stern and questioning, and a look of calm understanding spreading over it. His face cracked into a soft grin that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “So *this* is the boy you talked about all the time when you were in high school?”

“Dad!” Janie’s heart dropped into the floor. Her face turned a bright red-whether from embarrassment, nervousness, or anger, she wasn’t sure-and she positioned her hair so it covered her from Charlie’s view. “It was not all the time.”

“Oh, don’t be embarrassed, he should feel flattered by it,” Tom said, leaning back.

“I am, sir.” Charlie responded and flashed a grin. “Janie told me that the two of you had a very close relationship in high school, so I’m not surprised she told you about us.”

“She said that, did she?”

“Yes, I was telling her about how I am very close with my father, and we ended up getting into conversation about it.”

“You’re forgetting to mention that our relationships with our dads are very different.”

Janie didn’t look towards Charlie at all as she spoke. “That’s why we were talking about that.”

Amy entered the room at this, Nick and Tommy running in after with toy cars in hand. Her face still glued in the same semi-permanent half smile that she had left with.

“The casserole will be done soon,” she said, shifting the place settings around the table. She looked up from her organizing at the group: Janie glaring at Tom, him mimicking her heated stare, and Charlie sitting on the sidelines in silence. “What are you all talking about in here?”

“Nothing,” Janie snapped. Amy shifted her eyes back and forth from her daughter, to Charlie, and back to her husband, then took her seat next to him and took a slow sip out of the glass of water in front of her.

“So, when are you heading back to school?” Tom pressed.

Janie looked at him with eyes like ice. “You really don’t know when I’m going back to school?”

“I was talking to Charlie, sweetheart.” Janie flinched. He didn’t call her any nicknames, especially not like that.

“I’m actually not in school,” Charlie responded, glossing over the interaction.

“What do you do, then?”

“I work in my dad’s shop.”

“And does that make you money?”

“Dad,” Janie hissed, but Tom ignored her.

“A decent amount, enough to get by on. I live with my dad, too.”

“Is that what you’re planning on doing long term?” Amy jumped in now, pursing her lips. Janie could see the look of judgement creeping into her eyes, the one she knew all too well. It was the look she got that disguised itself as kindness when she was really using what she saw as a fault in others to make herself feel better than them.

“As of now, yes.”

“Why did you decide to do that, instead of going to school?”

“It’s what I’m good at. School wasn’t really my thing.”

“Well, we need someone for everything in this world, isn’t that right?”

“Yes, I believe you’re right.”

Janie knew Charlie was uncomfortable, it radiated off of him even though he answered their pressing questions. Tom sat back in his chair, arms folded and a smirk on his face as he observed his wife taking over the questioning. He wasn’t watching Charlie, though, but watching Janie, seeing how her face reacted as Amy asked each question.

“Can you stop grilling him, please?” She finally burst out, the pressure of Tom’s stare forcing it out of her.

“I’m just getting to know him.”

“No, you aren’t. I know what you’re doing, and I don’t like it.”

“What exactly am I doing?”

“You’re using him to distract yourself from what’s happening here. Both of you.”

“Hey, it’s fine, I’m not upset about it. I’m used to it,” Charlie said softly.

“It isn’t about being upset, it’s that my mom keeps asking you a million different questions because she doesn’t want to talk about what’s actually going on with her.”

“And what’s actually going on with me, exactly?” Amy asked, her voice sharp.

“Do you really want to talk about that right now? Because it seems like you’ve been avoiding it. We all know why we’re here tonight, so stop trying to cover it up.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You two? Both at dinner, making sure we’re all together before I leave? I know what’s coming.” Nick ran over and tapped her on the shoulder with his toy car, but Janie pushed him away. He sat on the ground quietly, running the car over the legs of the chair. Tom and Amy looked away from each other to Janie, then their eyes flickered over to Charlie.

“And before you try and hide it, he knows everything too.”

The three sat in silence, each daring the other to speak next. Janie could still sense Nick’s body positioned under hers, playing quietly enough that he could easily have not been there at all. Tommy had walked into the room as well, not fazed by the silence between the three adults at the table, unnoticed by his parents as he walked over where Nick was sitting. Janie tensed, not wanting them to be here for this and not knowing if her parents were aware of them there-or if they cared at all.

“Well, you’ve seen it coming.”

“Yeah, I have.” Before Amy could say any more, Janie spoke again. “And honestly, it’s about time you two stopped all of this.”

She leaned back against her chair, where Charlie’s arm hung lightly over her back, and shifted uncomfortably against it as she made eye contact with Tom. As she did, he shook his head ever so slightly that she could barely make it out. The nerve he had on him, she thought, that he wanted her to stay quiet after years of him pouring his secrets into her with no regard for the effect he was having on her. With no regard for her feelings, for her sanity. She knew what she

was thinking, she knew him far too well - he just wanted to get out of this without a hitch. And she didn't want that to happen at all.

“We aren't doing this to upset you.”

“You think it's this that upsets me? No, it's that you two have completely checked out and I've had to be the only one out of you two who was moderately stable enough for all of the kids you had. That neither of you ever cared or noticed.”

“You think that you've been stable? You've been leaving the house every day without telling us where you're going, I've found bottles hidden in your closet. So don't say that you've been stable, don't act like you've even tried to be helpful.”

“You went in my stuff?”

“You found what in her closet?” Tom jumped in.

“Yes, I found alcohol in there. I went to go look and see what was going on with you, because I've barely even seen you all summer.”

“Janie, where did that come from? That's what you've been doing while I've been gone?”

“Like you would know what I've been doing either way. This is the most you've spoken to me in the past year.” Janie turned to her mother now, pointing her finger across the table at her.

“And of course you don't know what I've been doing, you've been hiding in your room all summer. At least I've been with the kids at all, instead of shoving them in front of the TV like it's a built in babysitter.”

“You really just gave up like that?” Tom asked, now looking over at Amy. “Since when have you been the type to just quit on your family like that?”

“You really want to start with me on quitting on your family?”

“Don’t turn this on me. You can’t always point fingers at someone else when they call you out on being wrong.”

“Like you don’t do that? You sit here and back out, acting like you’re the mediator for our discussion, when you’re a part of all this too.”

“It sounds like there’s a lot that neither of you have told me. I deserve to be involved.”

“Really, Tom? If you truly care to know what’s going on, then ask her right now.”

“Yeah, dad, ask me what’s happening, please.”

Tom glanced over at her and back to Amy, opened his mouth, and closed it again. Janie knew he wouldn’t, for fear of what she would say back to him. Silence fell over the table until he spoke again. Janie sunk down into her chair, looking up at the man sitting across from her, and she didn’t see her father, the man who had become her confidant so long ago. She saw a man who had let his life slip out of his hands long ago and had been willing to put the weight of his problems on the back a seventeen year old girl.

“See? You can’t even talk to her in front of me.”

“I’m choosing not to say anything, Amy. There’s a difference there.”

“Why the hell not? I should have known, though, that you would refuse to speak up and actually talk for once. As if you would change at all after everything that’s happened.”

“Are you fighting?” Came a little voice from outside the table, and everyone’s heads turned to see Nick’s face peeking over the side.

“No, Nicky, we’re just having an adult talk,” Janie said, motioning him over to her. The little boy came to her side, and she put her arm around him lightly.

“What are adult talks?”

“It’s where we talk about serious things, Nick, so that you don’t have to worry.”

“What’s serious?”

“Well,” Janie looked up at her parents, then back down at Nick. If anyone was going to break it to him, it should be her. She didn’t trust them to give the response that wouldn’t hurt him, they had already done enough to her for her to know that. “We’re talking about if mommy and daddy got two houses.”

“Two houses?” His face crumpled in confusion, and Janie sighed. She could almost feel the tension rolling off her parents from across the table, but she tried to ignore it. They hadn’t spoken yet, and she didn’t want them to.

“Sometimes adults need a break from each other, so they get a house for both of them to live in. And then you get to have alone time with mommy in her house, and alone time with daddy in his house.”

“Does Lily-Anne have to come with me?”

“Yes, we would all go together.”

“Why can’t we have this house? I like this house.”

“Because, Nick, sometimes mommies and daddies are married, and sometimes they aren’t. When they aren’t married, then they get two houses.”

“Are mommy and daddy married?”

“They aren’t going to be, soon.”

“What does married even mean?”

“It just means that you want to be with someone forever, someone who isn’t your brother or sister. Someone you pick. And sometimes you don’t pick the right person.”

Janie scanned the boy’s face for any sense of comprehension, but didn’t see much changing behind his eyes. She looked over at her parents, her mother with her mouth open, looking as though she wanted to speak but couldn’t, and Tom watching her with a vacant look in his eyes. She couldn’t help but wonder how they had planned to explain this, and wondered why these two people had ever thought they could have four children together. It ignited the fire inside her stomach again, seeing the blank stares on their faces, knowing that this was not the first and definitely not the last time the responsibility that they couldn’t handle would fall on her.

“Why don’t you go talk to Tommy about this. Maybe he can explain it to you, okay?” She sent the boy out with a pat on his back, then turned to her parents.

“You really didn’t have anything to say to him?”

“What were we going to say?” Amy asked. “It wasn’t like you gave us a chance.”

“Either of you could have stepped in at any time. What was your plan? To sit us all here and talk it through like robots? I’ve seen how you two handle serious stuff, and I know that leaving it to the two of you wouldn’t have gone well.”

“So you know how to parent better than us now?”

“I’m saying that both of you are terrible at communication. And now it’s affecting the little kids, not just me.”

“We’re going to handle this in the way we think is best, not how you think we should.”

“What were you planning on doing, surprising me with this too? At a dinner that was supposedly about me?” Amy and Tom looked at one another without saying anything to Janie.

She groaned from her side of the table. “Exactly. You two haven’t thought about me, that’s for sure, but I don’t want to just sit around and watch you mess with them, too.”

“What we’re deciding to do is what’s best for us, and that will eventually be better for them. You think it would be better for your father and I to stay together, completely resentful, just for their sake?”

Charlie’s voice rose for the first time since the news had spilt. “Maybe it is for the best. It’s not all that bad, really, having your parents not be together.”

“That’s not it. I’m mad because they’ve been doing that all this time anyways.”

“What are you talking about?” Amy asked.

“I’m talking about the fact that *he’s* just now deciding to make a change when he should have a long time ago. But it isn’t even his decision, is it? It’s yours, it’s always been yours.”

“It was a mutual decision.”

“I highly doubt that. Dad couldn’t make that decision even if it had been given to him, I know that.” She glared at Tom as she said this.

“Janie, maybe it would be best for you to go to your room for now,” Tom jumped in, quickly darting his eyes towards Amy before looking at his daughter. “Settle down, we can talk after this, just the two of us.”

“Actually, I’m just fine here,” she said, sitting back and crossing her arms. She dared him with her eyes to make her go. “Since when has just the two of us mattered, anyways?”

“What’s going on between you two?”

“Nothing,” Tom and Janie said in unison, not breaking eye contact.

“Something is always going on between you two. I’m sick of being treated like I don’t deserve to know something my husband and daughter both do.”

“There’s nothing to know.”

“Bullshit there’s not. You’re both acting like there’s something about my own marriage that I’m not aware of.”

“Janie, isn’t this what you want? Isn’t this what you’ve wanted all along?” Tom lowered his voice as he spoke, talking over Amy.

“Wanted all along?” Amy asked, met with nothing in return. Janie could sense her frustration building, but ignored it, not looking her way.

“Not like this. Not this at all, you know that.”

“What did you want, Janie?”

“It’s between me and Dad.”

“What’s between you two I have a damn right to know too.”

“No, you don’t, actually.” She finally looked at her mother, glaring at her from across the table. “Maybe *you* should leave, and Dad and I should have a conversation now.”

“What the hell are you two on right now, talking about this like it’s normal?” Amy’s voice rose even sharper in pitch. “Tom, why are you even discussing our marriage with her?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time he has.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

The table fell silent. Janie became suddenly aware of Charlie’s presence next to her, had

forgotten him as her they had begun to hash it out. It seemed they all had, and now the silence in the room felt louder than anything anyone had said so far.

“Charlie, I think you need to leave,” Janie said quietly, not looking his way. Tom had made eye contact with her, and she was trying to figure out what he was trying to say to her.

“You’re kicking me out?”

“This doesn’t concern you.”

She now looked at him as she said this. His face fell, and she could see the concern in his eyes, but she was unmoved by it. She nodded her head towards the door.

“Yeah, okay,” Charlie said softly, standing from his seat. “I’ll talk to you soon.”

“We’ll see.” She didn’t know if she wanted to talk to him again. Not because he had seen her family falling apart that night, but because he had served his purpose, and now he felt almost useless to her. Just another moving piece in this messy game, and she didn’t know if she wanted to keep track of another.

“You serious?”

She looked up at him now, breaking her stare. “I clearly have a lot going on right now.”

“Got it.” He shook his head, his face firm and eyes stone cold. He turned to leave, heading out of the room without anyone moving to walk him out. The three remaining stayed silent until they heard the front door shut, and Amy slammed her hands on the table.

“I’ve always known there was something off about your relationship. I never wanted to believe it, but it was so secretive, like you had something to hide. And now I find out you two were talking about *our marriage* the whole time?”

No response followed her statement.

“And you,” she looked at Tom now, eyes blazing. “If you could have just talked to *me*, then maybe you wouldn’t have felt the need to go and cheat on me. We actually could have worked together to make things better.”

“You never would have tried to work things out.”

“I have done nothing but try to make this family great for all of us for the past nineteen years, for everyone to be happy and cared for, to have the stability that I craved growing up. So tell me, why would I want things to get so bad that my husband feels the need to have some secretive affair not only with our friend, but with our *daughter*?”

At the word affair, Janie felt her stomach sink into itself and her mouth dry. She realized that her relationship with both parents had been ruined. She knew too much, Janie wasn’t sure if her mother would see her the same again. What she had thought had been contempt when she looked at her before was nothing in comparison to the look in her eyes as she talked to Tom now.

She looked at the woman standing up at the table now, struggling to find her mother in her. Her curled hair was frizzy from how often she had been running her hands over it as they had spoken, her dark roots spilling over her skull. Her eyes were hollow, the makeup around them smeared ever so slightly underneath. But more so than that, Janie could see that she had sunken in to herself, her usually confident demeanor beaten down by the years that she had spent knowing something was wrong, and not knowing what to do about it.

From outside the room was the quiet chatter of the younger children, who had stayed away from the room after hearing the raised voices. Lily-Anne’s voice came floating into the dining room, yelling for her mother to come and help her get a toy, blissfully unaware. Amy stood up from her seat slowly, and Janie could tell that she was uneasy in her movements.

“I want you out by the time I’m done helping her,” she said to Tom, then turned to Janie. She almost flinched away when she did, expecting the hatred that was oozing across the room now to reach out and slap her. But instead, the anger that she had just seen in her mother’s eyes had disappeared, filled only by a look of longing, despair, and heartbreak. “We can talk later, Janie. But please, I hope you know that I don’t blame you for this.”

Janie wished that she hadn’t said this. Her mother looked at her with sad eyes before giving herself a small shake, as if snapping back in to her own body, brightening her eyes and lifting her face. Guilt crept over Janie’s bones, down every nerve in her body as she watched her walk out of the room and towards the others, ready to put on a brave face for them to make sure everything would be all right. Just as she had always tried to make it for all of them.

Maybe it hadn’t been right, the things he said to her, and maybe it hadn’t been right, the way that they had both been treated for so long. Maybe none of their decisions had been okay. Maybe it hadn’t been right, all the things they had said, how she had pushed him to talk, had egged him on for so long to just leave her. What was once a desire for company had turned into a desire for revenge for issues that she didn’t want to handle herself. So she had used him and his weakness, manipulated a situation to try and get what she had wanted.

She had never really thought that there would be any mess left behind, had always just assumed that her mother didn’t truly care if he was there or not. She had fought him so much on it, and she slumped back into the seat as she remembered all the times that they had argued.

It had all been wrong. Every one of them sitting at that table had been wrong.

And it was too late to do anything about it.